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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001984

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11-17-13

TAGS: PTER PGOV PINS PHUM CE NO

SUBJECT: In meeting with Ambassador, President Kumaratunga shows little flexibility

Refs: Colombo 1982, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: President Kumaratunga showed little flexibility in a discussion with Ambassador on November 17. She indicated she wanted to keep the Defense portfolio in a National Unity Government. She promised to uphold the peace process, support the role of the Norwegians and the SLMM, and to make clear to investors that Sri Lanka was a safe place. She showed little interest in fresh elections. She showed a possible hint of compromise at the end of the conversation. She praised the U.S. role and U.S. statements. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Ambassador met with President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga (CBK) on November 17 for two hours. The first hour and a quarter was a non-stop disquisition by CBK on the evils of UNP rule since 1977, and the part in that played by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. When she got down to business, CBK made the following points:

-- She took the actions she did in the national interest because the UNP Government and PM Wickremesinghe refused to allow her her constitutional role.

-- Her preferred solution is the formation of a National Unity Government, which, she says, the PM had proposed when he first came into office. However, she will insist on a proper role for herself (not a "rubber stamp") in such a government.

-- She intends to keep the Defense Ministry portfolio, although she has proposed to the PM that they agree on a Deputy Defense Minister.

-- She is not in favor of new elections, although she believes that the SLFP and the JVP together could "eke out" a majority.

-- She agrees that the situation needs to be resolved quickly.

13. (C) Ambassador made the point that we were not interested in intruding in Sri Lankan internal affairs and did not want to get in between the PM and the President. However, we were concerned about the effect of the situation on the peace process and on economic growth, and it was important that it be clear that she supported the peace process and that her actions were not intended to create instability. He also suggested that she make clear that she supported the roles of the Norwegians and the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM). CBK agreed with all of the above. She blamed sensationalist media reporting on the influence of the local AFP correspondent who is, she said, a relative of the PM's, and who wanted to create an impression of chaos.

14. (C) Ambassador asked CBK if reports in newspapers that the establishment of some type of "Peace Commission" could settle the issue were true. CBK stated that no one had discussed the idea with her. "Maybe the PM will propose it to me when we meet tomorrow," she said. (Her statement may have been carefully phrased, as press reports say that one of her close advisers is discussing this idea with the UNP.) Finally, CBK dropped a hint of possible flexibility by stating that "if the Prime Minister wants to make some arrangement, we can settle this -- if he drops some of the conditions he is insisting on."

15. (C) CBK closed by saying that she appreciated the statements the U.S. made after her actions. She also noted, as she frequently does, that she has never had a chance to meet President Bush, and she hoped that could be arranged some time. Ambassador noted that with elections approaching, the President's schedule was very tight.

16. (U) Minimize considered.

LUNSTEAD